

Sketch

Volume 54, Number 2

1989

Article 16

For My Sister in Portland, Maine

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For My Sister in Portland, Maine

1. You shoot cancer
into mice,
wait until their hair falls out,
their pink bodies blow up
and their legs can't
hold up their heavy bodies
and then you relieve them,
stick a needle in,
draw on the plunger,
drag the liquid from them,
like a drain
and then you wait
until they bloat again,
perform the same ritual
over and over again,
until one morning you find
their hearts,
eaten by the cancer,
have given up
and their pink, hairless bodies
float in themselves,
still, on the cage floor.

2. Your lover, Sally,
shoots insulin
every morning
near the edge of the bed,
as Portland cold
strains against the window.
Every morning,
you lean, propped on your arm,
the blankets pulled up around you,
and you watch
her fingers move
the plunger in.

Wilberton

At night she performs the same ritual,
before climbing in
beside you.
Sometimes in the middle of the night you wake
to the rattle of the wind
and Sally stumbling
across the room,
down the hall to the kitchen,
where you hear her
rooting around in the refrigerator.
You know she is gulping HI-C,
trying to balance herself
before coming back to bed,
smelling of cherries or strawberries
or Hawaiian Punch.
In the empty lot next to our house
we would peel the thorns
off of big picker bushes,
dip them into purple berry juice
and inoculate each other and the neighborhood kids,
from horrible diseases.
We would line up
and wait our turn
to pull down one side
of our Toughskins,
expose our cheek,
and cringe at the little stab
of needle that would save us.

3. Your only friend is a drag queen,
who you put on the phone when I call.
“Do Divine” you tell him
and he falls into a well rehearsed impersonation.
Sally knew him from before,
before she left Maine,
before she ended up in New Jersey
pumping gas for the Hess station
next to Dad’s garage,

For My Sister

before she met you.
When she met him he wasn't a drag queen
he was a patient in the same mental hospital;
they both had tried to kill themselves,
When Dad kicked you out,
you said, "Portland is a good place,"
even though you had never been there.
Sally's mother still lived there
and you had followed women
out of Jersey before--
Dakota City, Nebraska, San Anton, Texas,
Aberdeen, South Dakota,
Phoenix, Arizona,
and Portland, Maine.
You and Sally took
the two one-way tickets
that Dad bought
and now when I call you
I listen to the litany of jobs--
the factory where you worked
until you got in a fight with two
other dykes that worked there,
then you worked with plants,
cleaning and replanting,
then you stocked shelves
in the health and beauty aisle
of a grocery store,
from eleven at night until seven in the morning,
and now you watch mice die of cancer,
sit in the break room three times
a day, and listen to the other women's
tales of marriage, boyfriends,
needlepoint. One is getting married
at the end of May.
She tells stories of renting halls,
picking the lace trim for her dress,
and honeymoon spots: Niagara Falls,
The Pocanos, Cape May.
You listen

Wilberton

to them call the male receptionist
a faggot and keep quiet,
you need a ride home from work
everyday;
you don't think they'd drive a dyke home.

The first time I heard that you were a lesbian
I was in the sixth grade,
and Janet Glassman told me
you were kissing girls in the bathroom.
She's the same one who told me, in first grade,
that Santa Claus wasn't real.

4. I remember when we were little
and we lived in that big gray house.
The trains blew through our backyard.
We would put coins on the tracks,
wait in the woods
for the train to come and go,
then we'd run out,
search for the flattened pennies.
They were gold
and this was the gold rush.
Cream soda became whiskey,
our jersey accents became slow,
limping drawls,
and we would celebrate our discoveries
at the saloon,
at Babe's abandoned dog coop.
She disappeared after you trained her
to bite my legs,
as they dangled from the seat of my highchair.
I never blamed you for this.